Elizabeth Cilliers

Tok Essay

3. “The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.” Evaluate this claim.

Knowledge can be obtained by a person and by possessing that knowledge the person has an ethical responsibility for it. This suggests that by merely knowing something we have an ethical responsibility for it. Though this claim in some aspects can be argued as true, it may be argued against that this is not always the case and that the possession of knowledge does not always carry an ethical responsibility. What is more is that surely ethical responsibility can only be established once the knower decides what to do with his knowledge and not simple because the knower possesses it. This ambiguity within the statement leaves room for misinterpretation. What is most certain is that with the possession of knowledge, we have the responsibility to decide whether knowledge ought to be shared or not and how knowledge ought to be used. These decisions made involve ethics which are judgements of what we believe to be right or wrong.

Ethics are the moral principles that govern a person's or a group's behaviour. It deals with the moral choices we make that reflect our values and refers to how we should act, not how we do or how we have. We use ethics to analyse decisions, beliefs, and actions. When we have an ethical responsibility for something, we have the responsibility to use, share or keep it in such a way that it will be ethically correct. With the possession of knowledge, ethical responsibility is to make use of one's ethics to determine the most correct way to share and use his knowledge.

There are two main ways of knowing in which we may attempt determine what is most ethically correct and not. These are reason and emotion. We often use reason to judge and weigh the consequences, motives and benefits of possessing certain pieces of knowledge and what we decide to do with it. On the other hand, we use emotion as a way of knowing as well and this influences our decision on what we decide to do with our knowledge. Depending on the emotional state of the knower, knowledge may be used for good will or alternatively emotion may influence one to use it for wrong doing.

Though an ethical responsibility for the possession of knowledge is suggested in the claim, there are certain areas of knowledge where this does not necessarily apply. Maths, as an area of knowledge, can be argued not to carry an ethical responsibility for its knowledge. If a student in a classroom is familiar with basic mathematical skills and knows that the square root of 25 is 5, there is little reason for the person to carry any sort of ethical responsibility for knowing it. Knowing that the square root of 25 is 5 does not potentially bring about any good or bad to mankind whether he decides to share it or not. What is more is that whether he decides to share it with the other students in his classroom or not is not necessarily determined by his ethics as the knowledge that the square root of 25 is 5 is supposedly known by everyone in the classroom. Thus it is justified that the knower would not necessarily have an ethical responsibility for possessing knowledge that is already known by those around him or her.

There are however, certain areas of knowledge where one could perhaps justify that the possession of knowledge does indeed carry an ethical responsibility. Where one has the possession of knowledge that has not yet been discovered, there may be ethical responsibility for it. This is assuming that ethical responsibility is established by simply possessing the knowledge and not having decided as yet what to do with it. This aspect pertains especially to Natural Science as an area of knowledge. There have been various important discoveries made by scientists and doctors in their fields of study over centuries. These discoveries have helped improve the lives of mankind while some discoveries have done the opposite and have harmed it.

By simply possessing undiscovered knowledge, one carries the ethical responsibility to either share it or keep it from others. Furthermore, ethical responsibility is established when the possessor decides how to apply or what to do with his knowledge. Dr. Maurice Hilleman, an American microbiologist, is well known for discovering and developing over 36 vaccines, 14 of which are most commonly used vaccines today such as those for mumps, measles, chicken pox, pneumonia, and meningitis. His measles vaccine alone is estimated to prevent 1 million deaths worldwide every year. Dr. Hilleman, using his ethics, had the responsibility to decide what to do with his knowledge of undiscovered vaccines as well as his improvements for already discovered vaccines. He had the ethical responsibility to share his knowledge with the public as sharing his knowledge would have and has benefitted many lives throughout the world. If Dr. Hilleman had chosen not to have shared his knowledge and discoveries about vaccines, we cannot be sure that another person would soon or ever make the same discoveries as him and many lives would perhaps have been lost because he had chosen to keep his knowledge to himself.

Another, more interesting scenario and example of ethical responsibility is the ethical dilemma faced by Albert Einstein in 1940. The commencement of the atom bomb project in the United States was predominantly due to a letter Einstein had written to President Franklin Roosevelt warning of the destructive potential of an atomic chain reaction as well as the possibility of atomic weapons being produced in Germany. Einstein, knowing the extreme danger associated with atomic weapons, made the ethical decision to share his knowledge with the United States government so that they could put a stop to Germany before they could develop atomic weapons and potentially cause mass destruction. However, putting a stop to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Germany would mean the development of WMD in the United States. This was a consequence Einstein had to consider and debate upon. The result was that Germany was not able to develop atomic weapons in time before the United States did however later the atomic bomb, intended for Germany, was dropped in Japan leading to massive devastation. In hindsight, Einstein said, “Had I known that the Germans would not succeed in producing an atomic bomb, I never would have lifted a finger.” Perhaps if Einstein had chosen not to expose Germany’s plan for an atomic bomb then the thousands of lives in Japan would have been spared. Then again, if he had chosen not to share his knowledge with the United States, perhaps Germany would have produced an atomic bomb eventually putting more lives at stake. When facing an ethical dilemma such as this, the knower carries an ethical responsibility to decide first whether to share his knowledge and to then secondly decide how to use his knowledge and to who’s benefit. To be ethically correct, the knower can make a decision to use his knowledge in such a way that it might only benefit himself (self-interest theory) or he can use his knowledge to benefit the optimum or maximum amount people (utilitarianism).Thus, in situations where the possession of knowledge may affect others, the knower must have ethical responsibility for his or her knowledge. The knower has an ethical responsibility to decide whether sharing the knowledge and using it in a certain manner is ethically right or wrong.

It can be further argued that one can be given ethical responsibility for knowledge that has been obtained in the past. The knowledge we gather and learn from the past and past events help us to make better ethical decisions in the future. It was only after the abolishment of segregation and introduction of equal human rights for all peoples did the United States choose to put sanctions up against South Africa during the Apartheid era. Knowledge gained from a foreign country's own transgressions force them to act on that knowledge and attempt to prevent segregation and discrimination from happening again. Over time the ethics of people and societies change. In time later the United States as a society believed that the discrimination and segregation they subjected to people in their society was wrong and ethically incorrect. It is this knowledge they have learned from their own actions that helped make their decision to force South Africa to change the ways in which their country was run which was (as they believed to be) the right thing to do. Thus by possessing knowledge from the past we have an ethical responsibility to use that knowledge to make better and more ethical correct decisions.

While there are areas where one can argue that the possession of knowledge does not carry an ethical responsibility there are still areas where one can justify this claim as possibly true. It can be argued that with the possession knowledge already known by those around a person, whether it is a group of people or an entire society, the possession of knowledge may not carry an ethical responsibility. On the other hand, where the stake of a given situation, the people around you or mankind is at hand, the possession of knowledge (especially if it being unknown by people) may carry an ethical responsibility. With the possession of knowledge, the knower has the responsibility to decide whether knowledge ought to be shared or not and how the knowledge ought to be used using his or her ethics. With knowledge obtained from the past (knowledge known) we also have ethical responsibility to use that knowledge to make improved ethically correct decisions in the future.